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**Mackintosh, C.\* and Dempsey, C.\*\*(2016) The British Asian Muslim male sport participation puzzle: an exploration of implications for sport development policy and practice.**

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to explore intersections between religion, faith and social identity with regards to their impact on either promoting or preventing sport participation amongst self-identified British Asian Muslim males living in Birmingham (West Midlands of the UK) aged from 16-25 years old. The research questions around this topic of study are to explore how interpretations of Islamic faith promote or prevent sport participation amongst young Muslim males. Secondly, the paper will examine the perspectives of Muslim male participants in relation to sport to identify factors determining sport participation. Finally, the study will consider implications for policy and practice in sport development. The study drew upon seven in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Muslim males aged 16-25 years old and applied a thematic analysis and coding methodology to unpick the key dimensions and findings from the data. Findings from the study indicate the complexity of young Muslim male sport participation contexts, dynamics in decision-making, family influence and perceptions held about other communities and their own. The study draws out key implications for agencies in sport development that seek to encourage sport participation cutting across school, community, local government and national governing body partnerships specifically considering Islamic faith communities.

**Keywords: sport participation    sport development    Muslim    Masculinity**

**Introduction**

This article examines the complex interplay between British Asian Muslim religious identities and sport participation from the position of young males in England. It is increasingly thought that Islamic religion is negatively looked upon within the UK (Kilvington and Price, 2013; Lerman, 2010; Meer and Modood, 2009; Millward, 2008; Modood, 2014). British Muslim males between 16 and 25 are the focus of this study, but this should not be conflated with immigrant stereotypes, or simplistic notions of a homogeneous migrant community. A central motivation for undertaking the study is to provide a voice for the specific individuals in this study, not as a generalised reflection of 'Islamic youth' or British

‘Asian Muslims’ as a whole. Instead, we hope to illustrate the complex, textured milieu and identities that they inhabit and negotiate in their everyday lives. In particular, this considers how faith and religion plays a role in negotiating both their multiplicity of identities and how they engage with sport participation. The article is an attempt to move away from perceptions of monolithic religious, racial and ethnic identities (Ahmad and Seddon, 2012; Baiza, 2012). It embraces the view that identity is always ‘in process’ and ‘being formed’ (Hall, 1994: 122).

Sport itself has long been recognised as an important indicator and space for negotiating cultural meanings, values and identities (Jarvie and Thornton, 2012). Sport has also been identified as an important site of cultural and institutional racism (Burdsey, 2006; Cleland, 2014; Millward, 2008). However, participation is still low and has continuously been explained very simplistically by ‘religious or cultural restrictions’ (Ismond, 2003). Most recent figures from government have shown that Black and Minority ethnic groups continue to be considerably under-represented in sports activities (Sport England, 2016).

It is also important to recognise that whilst such terms as ‘race’, ethnicity, culture and religion are often used inter-changeably they each carry a multitude of complex, contested and often competing definitions. Indeed, conceptualising these key terms in detail is beyond the scope of this paper. Although, we do provide clarity on how we approach conceptualising, researching and engaging with religious and faith-based social identities we are exploring later in this paper. Correspondingly, the level of in-depth research undertaken with British Asian Muslim male youth communities around sport participation and particularly the sensitivities and culture of their faith in England is limited (Amara and Henry, 2010; Ratna, Lawrence and Partington, 2016) and has led to the undertaking of this focused piece of research. This is not intended to contribute towards a further ‘othering’ of difference on ethnic and religious lines. Instead, it is hoped that the article and the voices of the research participants will help open dialogue and opportunities for intercultural communication (Holliday, 2011) and illustrate the interplay of complex choices and decision making around sport participation. The specific aims of the research questions within this topic of study are:

- to explore and identify the factors that shape, influence or limit sport participation amongst young British Asian Muslim males in England;
- to examine the meanings, beliefs and perspectives of British Asian Muslim male participants in relation to sport to establish specific factors that determine sport participation in England;
- to understand and consider the interplay between religion, faith and sport for British Asian Muslim males in the context of sport participation;

- to consider the implications for sport development policy and practice in increasing opportunities for sport participation for British Asian Muslim male communities in England.

The paper is also part of a broader project to engage with, and challenge, dominant popular representations of Muslim identities (Gale and Hopkins, 2009) and popular ‘us and them’ orientalist discourses (McGinty, Sziarto and Seymour-Journ, 2013). As part of this endeavour we aim to also move beyond the binary opposition of young British Asian Muslims as individuals in ‘constant identity crisis’ or ‘new folk devils’ (Shain, 2011) and the idealized ‘future of Islam’ (Ahmad and Seddon, 2012). Likewise, we want to embed ourselves in wider political agenda of centring marginalised voices and stories of everyday sport experiences (Amara and Henry, 2010; Burdsey, 2011; Lawrence, 2011; Ratna, Lawrence, Partington, 2016). Such accounts do not attempt to make bold ‘truth claims’ or generalisations.

In this paper sports development is taken to be defined as a field of public policy and practice and ‘process’ in itself, that,

“embraces the dual goals of increasing community sports participation linked to the aspiration to improve standards of elite sports performance. Furthermore, the work of the sports development officer (SDO) could embrace varied aspects of community sport including voluntary sports club development, community event planning, volunteer recruitment and retention, and coach education and development activities” (Mackintosh, 2011, 47).

It has a core focus on increasing sport participation through working with voluntary organisations, clubs and various youth work settings (Bolton, Elias and Fleming, 2008; Green, 2005), and, potentially those linked specifically to religious faith (Sport England, 2014). Historically, SDOs have also worked across organisational boundaries such as between national governing bodies, local authority youth work and leisure and the voluntary sector.

This focus has also been driven by community sport development evolving movement towards ‘target groups’ that have included religious and ethnic minority community groups and individuals (Amara and Henry, 2010; Hylton, 2013; Ratna, Lawrence and Partington, 2016). It has been identified that sport participation amongst Muslim individuals is significantly lower at all levels compared to the majority population (Amara and Henry, 2010; Bi, 2011; Carnegie Research Institute, 2009; Ratna, Lawrence and Partington, 2016). This overlap of two key under-researched spheres lies at the heart of this project. It also remains a considerable distance from the appealing rhetoric of narratives underpinning the recent London 2012 Olympics. Such high profile policy landmarks have been identified as specifically failing

to engage meaningfully with the complexity of religion and ethnicity in the UK and sport participation (Hylton and Morpeth, 2014; Spacklen, Long and Hylton, 2015).

## **Literature review**

The aim of this literature review is to examine the existing understanding of the impact of Islamic religion in relation to the promotion or prevention of sport participation amongst young Muslim males in England. It also examines the role of how British Asian Muslim male youths re-align, re-negotiate and constantly reconstruct sport participation with their religious cultural terms of reference. In relation to the aims of this study, the literature review will provide a background of the key issues surrounding this topic that were then explored in the fieldwork that was undertaken. Firstly, it will also offer a conceptualisation of British Asian Muslim male identity and define key terms of relevance to this study as a platform for exploring this research topic with young men in Birmingham.

### ***Conceptualising a multiplicity of hybrid British Asian Muslim male identities***

This study attempts to move away from classifying British Asian Muslims as a unified single group embracing calls for the recognition of ethnic diversity and understanding of ‘visible minorities’ (Modood, 2005) towards a much more nuanced and pluralistic manner (Modood, 2007). Few studies have examined the role of faith, religiosity and how young men make sense of religious identities (Islamic) and sporting participation (Amara and Henry, 2010). But, before examining existing understanding in this field it is necessary to outline how we conceptualise British Muslim identities. Others have argued that in the complexity of negotiating boundary construction, belonging and collective identity commonality lies in religion (Gilliat-Ray, 2010; Kabir, 2010). It has also been suggested that, “the crucial question to be asked is how Muslims understand themselves as Muslims. This question does not always seem to be taken seriously” (Bectovic, 2011: 1122). In this sense, this paper examines the context of how sport is part of the ongoing process of religious cultural identity formation, renegotiation and reconstruction (Hall, 1996; Modood, 2005) for young British Asian Muslim males. This project highlights diversity and heterogeneity within the Muslim community and “recognises also that Muslim is not always a religious category but may have a primarily political, cultural and national meaning” (McGinty, Sziarto and Seymour-Journ, 2013; 2). We have a core belief that through on the ground experience of conversation, negotiation and debate we can further blur the crude concrete distinctions between Muslim and non-Muslim. We also share the position of Modood who proposes that:

“my contention, then, within the limitations of all social categories, is that ‘Muslim’ is as useful a category for identifying ‘visible minorities’ as country of origin...it points to people whose loyalties, enmities, networks, norms, debates, forms of authority, reactions to social circumstances and perceptions by others cannot all be explained without invoking some understanding of Muslims” (2009; 193).

Modood (2009) also recognises the potential that there is a potential sense that Muslims coexist alongside notions of ‘us’ and ‘them’, but, without a fixed, single social identity. Kong (2009) usefully problematizes such homogeneous categories, instead outlining how such identities are fluid, fractured and not monolithic in their nature. We also embrace her definition of identity as one that “is constituted through constant struggles and negotiations, and needs to be understood as always constructed or imagined, the outcome of political processes (p.179). This study examines the role of sport in negotiating identity and how related practices, meanings and understanding shape every day and often ‘mundane’ sporting practices. It stands as a rare example of an empirical study focusing on Muslim male sport participation. It has been noted elsewhere that too often the specific dynamics of religion and the need for women only sport sessions were identified “as ‘the’ (only) issue in relation to provision for Muslim Communities” (Amara and Henry, 2010; 440). We embrace the view of these researchers that identifying community needs, complexities in social identities and the specific interplay of religion and sport in Islamic communities is central to improving provision, policy and practice in community sport.

Indeed recent studies of British Asian communities and cricket have not examined in detail religion and faith as drivers of participation and instead highlighting ethnicity, and racialized barriers to involvement, belonging and community provision (Ratna, Lawrence and Partington, 2016). The exception in this study was the incompatibility of Muslim cricketers with aspects of heavy drinking culture in some local league cricket clubs that was unsuited to aspects of Islamic faith. Thus, the interplay of religion, ethnicity, identity and sport needs bringing to the forefront of analysis of British Asian Muslims. For, as Hesse (2000) has contended, identities are multi-layered and ‘culturally entangled’. We recognise that ethnicity and social constructions of ‘race’ are deeply embedded, with a range of meanings and representations and cannot be separated from cultural and religious aspects of identity (Baiza, 2012).

This is not to argue that biological or new forms of cultural racism do not exist. Here, we take cultural racism “to describe recent racism based on the identification of cultural differences as justification for the exclusion of certain social groups” (Giddens and Sutton, 2013; 73). At its core, Modood (2005) outlines how cultural racism is a form of racism relying on cultural differences rather than biological

‘markers’ of racial superiority or inferiority. Here, cultural differences can be real, imagined, and constructed socially and historically. The realities of this play out in the high levels of social and economic exclusion, unemployment and cultural isolation of many young British Asian Muslims (Abbas, 2005; Ahmad and Seddon, 2012; Herding, 2013; Gale and Hopkins, 2009). The group of young men we spoke to did not broadly identify themselves as economically excluded, with the exception of one who was between jobs. Exploring intersections with unemployment, socio-economic exclusion was beyond the scope of this part of the research project.

Equally, often studies fail to recognise the diverse ways of defining difference and multiplicity of hybrid identities that have come to be associated with the socially constructed category of the British Asian Muslim (Baiza, 2012; Herding, 2013). This research project is underpinned by a belief that Muslim identity, constructs of ‘Asian’ and ‘British’ interplay with this faith system and are both non-fixed and fluid in nature. We consider British Asian Muslim as a heterogeneous social category and one that is constantly constructed, renegotiated and rebuilt by individuals as well as communities and wider society (Baiza, 2012; Kong, 2009). The study has tried to distance itself from the oversimplification of studying a distinct homogenous group.

Instead, we embrace notions of hybridity, and what Bhabba referred to as a ‘Third Space’ for social identities (Bhabba, 2004). In this sense hybridized identities come to represent denotations of non-biological, cultural combinations of mixed cultures (Brooker, 1999). Here the global and local interact and exist in constantly redefining what can be termed racial, ethnic, religious and cultural identities. In recognising the conceptualisation of how we can view British Asian Muslim identities we hope to theoretically underpin our analysis of the narratives and multiple identities of the young men in this study examining sporting practices and processes that interplay with Islamic religiosity. We support the central view that “one of the core problems of contemporary debates about Islam concerns the highly restrictive ways in which Islam is constructed without referring, often tellingly, to the view of Muslims themselves” (Gale and Hopkins, 2009; 2).

Sport and its role in the everyday lives of young Muslim men is an important and underexplored and potentially illuminating aspect of their multiple, fluid social identities that can counter dominant discourses and representations of ‘Islamic youth’. Or, as McGinty, Sziarto and Seymour-Journ (2013) have argued, it is through mobilising hybrid identities we can understand, argue for and outline new positions for Muslims in the West and present the realities of communities. Through this process we hope to contribute towards better intercultural communication (Holliday, 2011) and directly challenge cultural racism (Modood, 2005).

### ***British Asian Muslim communities, religious faith and sport participation***

In relation to Muslim individuals and sporting communities, Carrington and McDonald (2001) propose that sport has been recognised as an effective means of maintaining some form of stability as communities faced political and social problems due to their status as immigrants. This is not to argue that the British Muslims in this study are ‘immigrants’ themselves, in all cases they are the 3rd or 4th migrant generation of their families and have always lived in Britain. This is because there is a general belief that in relation to minority communities, sport can be used as an engagement tool and as a method of integration into society (Agergaard, 2011; Agergaard, 2016; Spaaij, 2015). However, this can cause conflict such as a rejection by the perceived ‘majority’ population (Kilvington and Price, 2013) as well as internal conflict due to the constant struggle of having to stay in touch with their familial origins (Burdsey, 2006; Hatzigeorgiadis et al, 2013). Likewise, discourse and narratives around integration can potentially further reify boundaries of ‘us’ and ‘them’ and build perceptions of otherness (Burdsey, 2010; Spracklen, Long and Hylton, 2015).

The majority of studies according to Carrington and McDonald (2001) were based prior to the twentieth century and note that the lack of sufficient literature focusing on South Asian involvement in British sport has contributed to the lack of understanding about the subject. Others have argued that within sport research, the focus on faith and religion from a social science perspective has for a long time been a marginal research area (AbdulRazak et al, 2010). This indication could suggest that a reason for the lack of understanding regarding this topic area is because of the lack of in depth analysis regarding the subject. Alongside this, most literature relating to sport participation focuses on Muslim women and barriers and challenges they face (Agersgaard, 2016; Dagkas and Benn, 2006; Knez, Macdonald and Abbott, 2012; Walseth, 2006; Walseth and Fasting, 2003). On the other hand, literature based on Muslim males focuses more on specific aspects such as racism, national identity and masculinity (Amara and Henry, 2010; Carrington and McDonald, 2001; Fleming, 1991; Hylton, 2009; Ismond, 2003). In relation to this, Benn, Dagkas and Jawad, (2011) state that religion is an under researched domain with regards to its influence socially and physically particularly in the field of education and sport development. This is supported by Coakley (2009) who states that research on sport and religion is scarce, proposing that studies that do exist have predominantly focused on religions other than Islam. This study in part aims to re-address this concern and an existing research gap in understanding in an area that is highly pertinent to current government interest in increasing level of community sport participation (DCMS, 2012). Recent research by government in England with Christian community in London has established the start of an emerging interplay between the need for new faith community research and understanding in sport development practice (Sport England, 2014).



Therefore, Coakley, (2009) continues this discussion and recommends that there is a need to know about the multiple ways in which different religions relate to cultural practices such as sport. This is then strengthened by Jarvie (2012) who states that research into Islamic faith and physical activity needs to become more mainstream in order to better understand sports and religious practices and social identities. He also proposes the need to undertake comparative studies focusing on sport, religion and spirituality. This component was not undertaken in the recent Sport England faith-based community research that considered solely Christian settings and activities (Sporting Equals, 2012; Sport England, 2014). Research undertaken by Long and Hylton (2012) state that the weight of evidence surrounding issues involving race and ethnicity has grown considerably within the UK due them having a higher political profile. This is important as these issues are now associated with being a problem within society, specifically because of events on a wider political scale which in fact involve the negative stereotyping of the Muslim community. This indication supports previous literature which states that this topic has been a marginal research area (Amara and Henry, 2010; Burdsey, 2006; Kay, 2006). In addition, this viewpoint indicates that this topic has only received an increase in attention due to it now being labelled as a 'problem'.

Some interpretations and representations within the academic literature tells us that Islam is a religion which promotes and encourages sport participation amongst both genders for reasons such as improving physical health, removing negative feelings, socialising and becoming a stronger Muslim for Allah (Amara, 2008; Farooq and Parker, 2009; Walseth, 2006; Walseth and Fasting, 2003). However, this is an indication which overshadows the reality that sport participation amongst Muslim individuals is significantly lower at all levels compared to the majority population (Amara and Henry, 2010; Bi, 2011; Carnegie Research Institute, 2009; Ratna, Lawrence and Partington, 2016; Sport England, 2016). In relation to this, there are significant issues with regards to a lack of clear strategy and direction at governmental policy level in relation to challenging the barriers and stereotypes associated with Muslim sport participation (Amara & Henry, 2010; Cleland, 2014). This is supported by the Carnegie Research Institute, (2009) who argue that there is a disconnection between research, sport policies and equality policies. This viewpoint is supported by Long and Hylton (2012) who state that policies involving BME participation and sport struggle to bridge the gap in trying to actually engage such individuals in sport.

A further call for action supported by this research project is that of Bi (2011) who states that policy involving BME individuals needs to be constructed from grassroots upwards, with the involvement of BME individuals and groups at all stages of the consultation process. However, Bi (2011) states that if participation amongst Muslim and BME individuals is to be positively affected they then need to be a part of the mainstream sports system, decision making and research agenda. In doing so this will increase their chances of integrating in western society whilst presenting themselves with an

opportunity to become recognised with regards to talent identification (Burdsey, 2006). Again, this project is a response to this call for such action, not to assume communities and individuals passively ‘assimilate’.

With regards to interpretations of Islam, sport and interplay with sport development, there are an unsurprising diversity of perspectives on the role, meanings and beliefs held around sport participation for Muslim communities. For example, Farooq and Parker (2009) state that in relation to young Muslim men, sport is an activity in which they can identify with and can even bring them closer to their religion. However, this favourable approach to sport is often also burdened with barriers that involve cultural stereotypes and religious misinterpretations (Carnegie Research Institute, 2009; Hylton, 2009 Ismond, 2003; Millward, 2008). This links back to the notions of cultural racism outlined earlier. These related barriers often involve the stereotypical view that ‘Islam itself’ is a barrier to participation. This view is now being directly challenged (Agersgaard, 2016; Collins & Kay, 2014 Knez, Macdonald and Abbott, 2012). Although to add to this issue, Amara, (2008) confirmed that sport in relation to interpretations of Islam can actually be seen as negative by stating that sport is not seriously considered by Muslim academics and is in fact neglected by Islamic scholars. Amara (2008) then states in relation to sport that despite the increasing interest in terms of promoting sport within Islam, it will always be thought of as a non-academic, non-serious activity restricted to the domain of play, and for some a negative distraction from religious teachings.

This viewpoint made by Amara (2008) links to the overall promotion of sport within Islam and it could be said that this negative view towards sport could potentially be a major factor in influencing participation due to the belief that sport is held as a less prioritised activity. This is also strengthened by previous sport development research undertaken by Fleming (1991 as cited in Collins and Kay, 2014) who whilst studying the relationship between young Asian males and sport in a school setting, found that Asian schoolboys lived out a self-fulfilling situation where they were not expected to do well at sport. A key reason for this was they culturally, valued sport less.

In relation to Islam and its perceived relationship with sport existing literature supports the belief that too many Muslim’s faith is the dominant aspect within their lives. This makes looking at Islam’s relationship with sport and sport development increasingly complex (Benn, Dagkas and Jawad, 2011). This is strengthened by Coakley (2009a) who agrees that studying Islam and sport is challenging due to the difficulty in analysing and separating Islam as a cultural form (Amara, 2008; Walseth and Fasting, 2003). This is noted by Coakley (2009a) who supports the belief that Muslims have always participated in sport but their participation is bound to what pleases Allah. Therefore, the priority given to sport depends on how Muslims interpret Islam within their lives (Kay, 2006 Walseth and Fasting, 2003).

What is clearer is that much remains to yet be fully researched in terms of how sport development agencies and policy makers are engaging with debate and determining ways forward for British Asian Muslim sport participation facilitation.

Engagement in sport participation can be an arena where personal and cultural identities are constructed, resisted and contested (Amara and Henry, 2010; Fletcher, 2012). It also lies at the heart of sport development practice (Mackintosh, 2011). In relation to this, some argue Muslim males are being forced to integrate into a society where they are the minority, and where they have to hold on to their cultural heritage (Fletcher, 2012). This can create conflict amongst Muslim individuals as they are expected to conform to religious dogma. However, existing literature has indicated that sport within western society might not be ready or willing to accommodate for the demands that Islam places upon it (Kahan, 2003; Millward, 2008). Some studies have suggested that embracing Islamic faith directly prevents sport participation. Here, sport is sometimes seen as more recreation-based, and a less prioritised activity within the lives of Muslims when it is compared to other aspects that are considered to present them with a higher social standing such as education and schooling (AbdulRazak et al, 2010; Burdsey, 2006; Farooq and Parker, 2009). Alongside this, it was identified that some interpretations of Islamic doctrine regarding sport are generally overlooked and not considered at all (Amara and Henry, 2010; Farooq, 2009; Hylton, 2009; Long and Hylton, 2012). This complex dynamic between faith, social identity and the multiple facets of religion, ethnicity and other aspects of social identities needs to be more centrally emphasised in the work of key sport development agencies.

## **Methodology**

### ***Rationale***

This research study was undertaken from an interpretivistic epistemological position and a constructivist ontology (Crotty, 1998; Blaikie, 2007). It shares the view of Vaismoradi et al, (2013) where we seek to arrive at an understanding of a particular issue from the perspective of those experiencing it. It is particularly important in the context of representing and understanding more complex and plural experiences of religious social identities and sport participation (Gale and Hopkins, 2009; Kong, 2009). It is the heterogenous, fluid nature of British Asian Muslim identities (Abbas, 2005; Modood, 2005; Modood, 2009) that are particularly suited to using in-depth interviews and collaborative fieldwork (McGinty, Sziarto and Seymour-Journ, 2013). Rationale for our approach is outlined by Walseth (2006) who believes that in-depth one-to-one interviews provide participants with the space to go into detail on rich themes and issues that they regard as important in their lives. This methodological stance also gives the space and flexibility to better understanding how young men in this project make sense of their religious Islamic identities and sporting interests (Amara and Henry,

2010). This was particularly important given the difficulty accessing the field, lack of prior understanding of the research area and hence exploratory nature of the methodology.

### ***Approach***

With regards to the criteria of this research project, participants recruited were British Asian Muslim males aged from 16-25 using a purposive sample. A total of seven semi-structured interviews were used during this research project, all were recorded verbatim and lasted between 45 minutes and one hour 23 minutes in length. The interviews used within this study consisted of a three part model used previously by Walseth (2006). The first part focused on the personal information of the participants, the second focused on the participants detailing specific moments in their lives where Islamic faith, ethnicity or culture has either promoted or prevented their participation in sport. The third part focused on themes identified in sport participation for British Asian Muslim male youth driven by the literature review. According to Smith (2010) interviews are a primary means through which a grasp of the context and content of young people's everyday lives can be gained.

Alongside this Denscombe (2007) notes that undertaking rich textured interpretivist thematic analysis benefits research topics dealing with complex, sensitive social issues associated with people's feelings and experiences. This was particularly beneficial for the complex interplay of subject areas of sport participation, religion, culture and ethnicity in this study as it provided a better platform for understanding the richness of issues relating to the topic (Denscombe, 2007; Silverman, 2011). Data analysis for this research study was conducted by using a thematic approach with coding (Silverman, 2011). This approach according to Vaismoradi et al, (2013) is defined as a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. Continuously, it is noted that this approach breaks down text into smaller units of content by organising and providing a clear system in order for the data to be accessed and used effectively (Fossey et al, 2002; Vaismoradi et al, 2013). In addition Vaismoradi et al, (2013) states that a theme is a coherent integration of the different pieces of data that represent the findings. Codes capture something important which relates to the research questions, and represent some level of meaning within the data. Moreover, themes identify relationships between the data that relate back to the research topic in order to form a series of patterns (Denscombe, 2007; Silverman, 2011).

### ***Research fieldwork context***

This research study was based in Birmingham (West Midlands of the UK) where, according to Birmingham City Council (2014) the total population in Birmingham is 1,085,400 and 21.8% of

Birmingham residents consider themselves to be Muslim. Participants for this study were recruited from one Islamic faith organisation which was located in Birmingham (West Midlands area of the UK). This organisation had previous experience in liaising and communicating with individuals in Muslim faith settings and sport development. Participants were recruited through the youth organisation leadership who gave the young people the opportunity of being involved in the research. Those interested individuals were then able to make further enquiries from the research team. This was considered important as this study required the participants to be comfortable in their surroundings talking about potentially sensitive matters of religion, faith and social identity. In addition, this was important due to the participants of the study being considered as ‘hard to reach’. Furthermore, we are aware that the respondents may well have been ones with an interest in sport, and that the non-engaged, non-participants are even more silent within this study. However, this study is deemed an exploratory project (Gratton and Jones, 2013) and as such, it is important to open dialogue with participants and offer future lines of enquiry. Indeed this project through using a purposive snowball sample provided two students and four working young people, and only one further participant who was currently unemployed. This does not perhaps reflect the wider socio-economic challenges and conditions facing large proportions of British Asian Muslim youths (Abbas, 2005; Ahmed and Seddon, 2012; Shain, 2011).

All research was confidential and anonymised and approved by the University Ethics Committee. Indeed, we have sought to not in any way to make the facility and youth work setting identifiable from identification of detailed ethnicities and theological interpretation/tradition of individuals in the organisation (e.g. Barewali, Deobandi and/or Bangladeshi, Pakistani and so on). This anonymity was very important to our research participants and thus they remain anonymised. However, to give a much richer feel for the seven participants involved in the study we provide some contextual detailed personal background in Table 1 below.

Participant	Participant information
Participant A	Male, aged 18. University student based locally in West Midlands area living at home with parents. Low interest in sport participation, but wider TV and media interests in cricket and football. Currently working in a temporary blue collar position.
Participant B	Male, aged 21. Young officer worker with interest in sport and some participation historically in cricket. Unclear if he currently ‘actively’ engages in participation. Professionally he was working in a graduate job in the IT industry.
Participant C	Male, aged 16. School student studying towards GCSE completion, passionate interest in sport participation now moving beyond compulsory PE participation. Family is also described by him as ‘sport supportive’.

Participant D	Male, aged 25. Gym member, but very irregular participant with a low-paid retail job and currently living at home with parents.
Participant E	Male, aged 19. Keen sport fan and regular football participant with friends and family members. University student describes himself as 'sporty'.
Participant F	Male, aged 21. Described himself as specifically self-identifying sometimes as 'sporty' living at home and currently between job employment.
Participant G	Male, aged 18, describes himself as 'open to sport' but in no way currently participating. Lives at home with family.

**Table 1: Breakdown of individual participant contextual information**

### *Accessing the field and researcher positionality*

In total over 26 organisations were approached by email in order to recruit one that was willing to be part of the study. This is an important aspect of the challenge for undertaking research and what other researchers in this field of youth research have referred to as 'silences' identities that we feel is particularly suited to the methodological approach we have adopted (McGinty, Sziarto and Seymour-Journ, 2013). Reasons for other organisations 'non-involvement' were not followed up as each approach was made through multiple email requests. After two responses we did not follow up further. Walker (2012) highlights this challenge around negotiating access, the importance of gatekeepers in youth research and finally 'being granted access'. Our position as non-Asian, non-Muslim, white researchers also may have played a role in influencing fieldwork, trust and rapport as authors have suggested (Padfield and Proctor, 1996; McGinty, Sziarto and Seymour-Journ, 2013; Walker, 2012). This in itself is perhaps indicative of the challenges faced by researchers attempting to capture the thoughts, attitudes and perceptions of Muslim male youth communities. Other researchers have talked openly, and honestly of initial mistrust and wariness of youth organisations in this field of social research (Back, 1996; McGinty, Sziarto and Seymour-Journ, 2012). Likewise it has been argued that researchers must pay close attention to the subtle cultures and histories of the places they research (Back, 1996; Nayak, 2006).

We also recognise that as two white, male researchers based in an academic institution we write and research from a very real position of privilege and power (McGinty, Sziarto and Seymour-Journ, 2012). Perhaps the strength of our 'positionality' lay in the fact that the lead researcher in the fieldwork was in the same age bracket as the young people themselves (Walker, 2012). Although, our initial approach to the organisation was by email and 'virtual' negotiations this then led to face-to-face contacts to build trust and relationships with the organisation as a collaborative partner in a shared research endeavour. But, we also acknowledge our positionality and that the differences of religion, ethnicity and perception

of social identity and class or ‘difference’ (McGinty, Sziarto and Seymour-Journ, 2013; Walker, 2012). Here we share the view of McGinty, Sziarto and Seymour-Journ (2013; 7) in their research with Muslim communities in America that “there was a power differential in which we were the ‘researchers’, while our community partners were not only the fellow researcher, but also the ‘researched’ ”. Indeed as two researcher without any real specific religious or faith denomination, we found this less significant to our participants than perhaps we had perceived as we built layers of trust and developed meaningful research relationships with them. We also recognise that there were occasional silences, in interviews, which, we were aware of, but have not discussed due to local sensitivities. The project has changed us as researchers, we feel more aware of the diversity within and between religious groups. It has also made us more aware of our own ‘lack of religious’ social identity we as researchers partly inhabit within our own social worlds and communities.

### ***Limitations***

Limitations to this research study included focusing on only one city in the UK. Multiple sites were a constraint due to limited timescales, funding and resources. We also had to have agreement from the community organisation leaders for our topic guide and hence, it may be that certain topics were not deemed appropriate. This could be deemed areas of research ‘silence’ that McGinty, Sziarto and Seymour-Journ (2013) highlight in their own reflexive account of undertaking research with Muslim communities. A further final limitation to the study included the lack of range of organisations and socio-economic backgrounds of people that agreed to participate in the study with only one organisation participating from 26 originally approached. As already stated most organisation simply responded with a communication ‘silence’. Interpretation and analysis of this methodological challenge is important and one that should be explored further. Again, it should be recognised that there are a diversity of Muslim faith organisations encompassing charities, schools, youth organisation and places of worship. Likewise, it is important to recognise the hybrid nature of identity (Baiza, 2012; Bhabba, 2004) as not all those young men will neatly ‘fit’ into social categories of Muslim. There are also a cohort of what Leonard, (2003) terms the ‘unmosqued’ Muslims. This has already been shown to be critical in understanding faith and sport development with regard to Christianity in the rich tapestry of 885 identified different London-based weekly physical activity sessions (Sport England, 2014).

### **Discussion and findings**

The analysis within this research study produced three key overarching themes in the findings that emerged from the data. These themes included exploring Islamic religious identities and the relationship

with sport; perceptions of Muslim female participation in sport and interpretations of Islam faith and the promotion or prevention of sport.

### ***Islamic religious identities and their multiple relationships with sport***

One of the major themes to emerge when analysing the data were the multiple social identities and how they aligned with sport. Given the multiplicity and fluidity of British Asian Muslim social identities (Baiza, 2012; Bectovic, 2013) it is unsurprising that there are a corresponding alignment of many relationships with sport. These views are echoed within the findings as they suggest that the participants are generally positive towards sport but view Islam in a mutli-faceted manner. One participant suggested,

*My whole family, we love sports. Anything we can do around sports we try to do it and promote it...It, kind of, changes what we do. It, kind of, completely changes our whole life. There's quite a lot of stuff we don't do..... (Participant C).*

In addition, it is emphasised within the study findings that individuals have their own view on Islam in relation to sport and as an end result base their participation around this. This is also important in giving a voice to diversity within the often monolithically perceived Muslim community (McGinty, Sziarto and Seymour-Journ, 2013). Alongside this, some of the implications from the findings suggest that Islam can actually be considered as holding a multitude of cultural guidelines and can therefore be closely affected by social situations, contexts, peer groups, family or the different priorities held by the participants within the study. One individual argued,

*I would say I'm, a pretty strong believer in Islam but I don't think it has, there's no obstacles in the way, like it's just, I suppose in terms of sport I could say there's no obstacles. I'm actually encouraged to stay fit and healthy.  
(Participant B).*

In fact this participant appears to recognise a little held positive perception amongst policy makers and researchers that sport can be actively promoted through its link with physical health and Islamic preaching. Furthermore, the complex multi-layered relationship between religious identity and active sporting choices is illustrated by the view that,



*I mean ultimately, Islam, It's a personal thing. I can't say 'Oh, you shouldn't do this' or 'you shouldn't do that'. It's up to you. I can tell you. I can't force you to, I can tell you. I can offer you, like, 'oh, this is bad, I don't think you should do this', but it's your own choice.*

*(Participant A).*

This point was re-iterated by another two respondents in their commentary on their lifestyles and view of Islamic faith and how it influences (or not) engaging in sport activities,

*Respondent: No it can't hold anyone back because sport is something you do for fun and Islam you do for... cliché but sport is physical and Islam is soul, it's like that.*

*(Participant F).*

*Respondent: Yes. I don't think it's specifically sport, I just think it promotes taking care of yourself, fitness which actually goes into sport.*

*(Participant B).*

The findings within this theme of the research study support the assertion made by Amara (2008) that Islam permits Muslim males to participate in sport as long as participation does not negatively affect other important areas relating to Islam. This is an important indication as all participants mentioned that they have aspects within their lives which could affect both participation and religion such as education, employment and participating in religious traditions. In addition, it is noted that participation is also permitted if the sports are beneficial to the health of the participants. This indication actually emerged within the research as some participants recognised that they are required under Islam to look after their bodies. In addition, this viewpoint is also followed by the participants recognising that sport is an opportunity for them to do that. Therefore, this indication can potentially act as a recommendation for future action. This is because Snape and Binks (2008) and Ratna, Lawrence and Partington (2016) in relation to South Asian communities state that sport development interventions have to date achieved a minimal impact in relation to increasing participation. Whilst on the other hand they suggest interventions relating to health have had more success in engaging South Asian communities. Therefore, the promotion of sport in relation to positive health benefits could be beneficial in increasing participation amongst Asian communities. Such subtle differences may be critical in developing relationships between faith communities and sport development practitioners aiming to increase participation levels. It also illustrates the importance of recognising complexity of locally negotiated aspects of identity in determining behaviour in response to government sport development policy (Mackintosh et al, 2015; Hylton and Morpeth, 2014). Sometimes this stands in contrast to pleas for

more national ‘insight’ and campaigns and products to shape participation in national sport development policy (HM Government, 2015; Sport England, 2016a).

In relation to the above results, the findings within the study support the indication from Farooq and Parker, (2009) that for many Muslim individuals Islam is the dominant ideology and is a significant influence within their lives. However, some findings within the study contradict previous results from Kahan, (2003) who states that even though Muslim individuals express positive attitudes towards sport and exercise, they give a religion a higher priority. In relation to this, participant E suggests:

*Like I said, I would like to if I could, have a mentality where I prioritise my religion a lot more, I would like to do that. Everyone wants to be good but I don't consider myself very religious but when I do sometimes try to practice it makes me feel better mentally and together emotionally. I don't know, the thing with me is I'm a bit lazy towards religion.*

*(Participant E).*

This viewpoint made within the study, supports the indication that Islam is an important factor within the lives of Muslim individuals but also indicates how Islam is individually negotiated, socially defined and constantly reconstructed (Kong, 2012). Farooq and Parker (2008) found that when studying Muslim males, sport and physical education provided an environment which enabled young Muslim men to disregard negative energies and emotions. With regards to the relationship between sport and Islamic social identity, findings here suggest that Islam interpretations do not directly affect the participant's ability to participate in sport. For example, participant C recognised the distinct lack of barriers that adherence to Islamic faith played in his potential sport participation. Further supporting past research (Amara and Henry, 2010), Participant C suggests religion is not necessarily an inhibitor of sport participation,

*Respondent: I don't think there is, I'm not really sure. But, so far I don't have a problem with religion coming into sports. It hasn't held me back from anything.*

*(Participant C).*

However, participants are expected to prioritise not only Islamic undertakings and associated religious practices but also education and other lifestyle factors in order for future life stability. This viewpoint parallels other findings which could suggest that sport is not considered by some Muslim participants as a sufficient career direction (Burdsey, 2006; Burdsey 2011; Ratna, Lawrence and Partington, 2016). This was indicated by participant F as a specified Bangladeshi cultural ethnic stereotype. However, it was stated within conversations that sport does in fact aid personal development and team work skills

which can be used in employment. Participant G indicated that he would 'chose' Islam over sport and that sport is something he thinks of as a lesser priority. Thus supporting some views that Islam is perceived to be the dominant cultural priority (Coakley, 2009a; Farooq and Parker, 2009). But, there is sufficient variation in the views of the young men in this research project to illustrate that such generalisations are not helpful, and offer an oversimplification of a highly multi-layered domain of social identities. Indeed explorations of 'the mundane' aspects of lifestyle through sport, physical activity, fashion and music (Herding, 2013) can potential offer illuminating new insights to how British Asian Muslim identities are negotiated and reconstructed on an everyday localised level.

In relation to this, a heavily influential factor which emerged from the findings is the influence of Muslim family's particularly traditional Muslim families. This is a consistent theme in existing literature (Burdsey, 2006; Kahan, 2003; Kay, 2006; Kay and Spaaij, 2011) where families are a key influencer when it comes to Muslim participation, where it could be that traditional Muslim families view sport as a negative distracting activity. Other participants suggested a diverse spectrum of standpoints in a highly complex, dynamic relationship between sport and Islamic religious identity driven by relationship such as close family:

*In relation to Islam? Well my Mum's words are if you've got time to do sport then you've got time to focus on Islam as well so we have to be 50/50.*

*(Participant F).*

This illustrates how parents, religious practice and sport are inherently interwoven for this young male. In contrast, other participants recognised how they had no perceived barriers to sport participation directly corresponding to practicing their faith through the family. This is contrasted with Kahan (2003) who states that traditional Muslim families instruct their children to follow their path, which causes them to frown upon sport as an impediment to achieving education and career goals. This critical nexus between family, sporting interests and Islamic faith factors is at the heart of uncovering the 'participation puzzle' so many policy makers currently seek to address (Mackintosh et al, 2015; Girginov and Hills, 2008).

### ***Male perceptions of Muslim female participation in sport***

A key issue in relation to this broader research topic is the participation of Muslim females in sport and physical activity. Whilst perhaps seen as beyond the core research aims of this study it is presented in this study as it shines a light on the subtle narratives of ethnic minority sport participation challenges that fall outside the seductive narratives of London 2012 assumptions (Hylton and Morpeth, 2014). This

issue is an established area of discussion within literature (Kay, 2006; Kay and Spaaij, 2011). It has been established that barriers including cultural misinterpretations, assigned gender roles and religious traditions are major reasons why participating in sport can be difficult for Muslim women (AbdulRazak et al, 2010; De Knop et al, 1996; Kay, 2006; Knez, MacDonald and Abbott, 2012; Maxwell and Taylor, 2010). According to Maxwell and Taylor, (2010) research focusing on this area has identified specific religious requirements that present challenges to Muslim females living in non-Muslim countries. Where this study has opened up new lines of enquiry are around male perceptions of female participation as a topic that emerged and formed synergies with wider characteristics of the debate and attitudes of sport in Muslim male individuals and communities. One respondent stated directly,

*I'm fine with it. I don't really have a problem with it. If I had a sister, I'd encourage her to do sport. If she liked it, I would encourage her. I wouldn't say, no, because you're a girl. I'd encourage her.*  
(Participant G).

But the subtle stereotypes and complex male-female interactions within the family setting and wider Muslim community can be seen in the following quote,

*Yeah, if they like it, they can. Yeah, I don't really get that- if they like it, they can, because they're benefitting themselves, but if they're going more into sport than they are into religion, I think that's when the boundary crosses.*  
(Participant G).

This was supported by the view that there are cultural boundaries to sport participation, both real and imagined (Amara and Henry, 2010), but that for some research participants such as Participant B they offer the view that,

*I think as time goes on, we've actually become more accustomed to it and understand that it's not only for males, females can also participate.*  
(Participant B).

This illustrates that social norms, behaviour and identities are temporal, fluid and changeable (Kong, 2009). As Kong has argued, it is by exposing and decentring homogeneous assumptions about religious communities that we can aspire to re-present British Asian Muslims as a more heterogeneous group that others such as Modood (2005, 2009) have called for. It is then less about building a truth, or stating generalisations and instead building local insights into varied experiences, translations and

interpretations of social meanings and identities. The above point is further consolidated by the view presented that,

*For me, I think, like I said before, women should be able to experience what men are doing, because men and women, there is no difference. There should be equality. But there's a way of doing so in adhering to the guidelines set in Islam.*  
(Participant A).

This mediation of norms and 'accepted' behaviour is important and shows the subtle adherence that gender groups may be expected to align with. Further clarity on his position was provided by a clear belief in equality offered later in Participant's A's interview,

*I agree that women should do sport. I don't believe they should be staying at home or restricted in any way to the fact that you should be able to cook and clean and I should be able to go out. You should be- I should be able to cook and you should be able to cook and clean.* (Participant A).

This also supports what Agergaard (2016) has expressed as a counter narrative against dominant discourses in her own research with young Muslim girls who interpret their religion as an embodied and dynamic cultural phenomenon. She calls for us to recognise the variety and diversity of ways in which Muslim youth respond to organising and approaching sport. This also moves beyond the reified single "only issue" mentality of sport administrators identified by Amara and Henry (2010) around female non-participation being due to clothing and single sex facility provision limitations. They suggest that the deeper complexity of issues around the role of faith needs to be recognised. It seems that the above statements begin to illustrate this, by showing male acceptance of female participation in sport. The above findings are supported by the research undertaken by Knez, MacDonald and Abbott (2012) who state that their research challenges previous studies which indicate that religious beliefs are the major factor for young Muslim females not participating in sport. This viewpoint is strengthened specifically because it links with previous research undertaken by Walseth and Fasting (2003) who state that Islam encourages Muslim women to participate in sport. In relation to this, it is important to note that all participants within the study were positive towards Muslim female participation and all of them believed that Muslim females should be able to participate within the boundaries of Islam.

In relation to this, not only do the findings from this research study indicate a positive view towards Muslim female sport participation. Emerging findings conflict with previous research which believes that Islamic traditions including gender roles for men and women can be a barrier for Muslim female participation. As participant A expressed, they should know what is right and what is wrong. This

indication is supported by AbdulRazak et al (2010) who, with regards to Muslim women, claims that they are influenced by cultural maintenance and how they are associated within their ethnic group. However, in relation to this AbdulRazak et al (2010) further mentions that for Muslim women, participating in sport is a challenge to the boundaries of their ethnic identities. This is also an indicator of how matters of gender, ethnicity, culture and religion intersect and interplay.

### ***Islamic faith and the interpretations of promoting and preventing sport participation***

A major area of discussion within this study was the impact that Islamic religious identity had in relation to preventing or promoting sport participation amongst Muslim males. This lies at the very core of current gap in sport development policy and practice within the national strategy (HM Government, 2015) and Sport England's vision for building opportunities for those 'hard to reach groups' (Sport England, 2016a). According to Foley (2009) Muslims who practice sport in Western societies constantly have to accommodate cultural and religious traditions which must be respected and adhered to. In addition, existing literature supports the indication that Islam must be prioritised above everything else and that everything must be done to please Allah. Amara (2008) states that some Islamic scholars believe sport is a negative distraction from religious teachings and should not seriously be considered as important. In relation to this, it could be said that Muslim individuals who are interested in participating in sport within the UK are put off due to the negative and unclear stance in relation to how sport is seen with regards to Islam. This indication is supported by Kahan (2003) who states that within their study a major barrier for participation was the confusion that students experienced in trying to balance their religious duties with society's expectations. This highlights the difficulty which is placed upon the lives of some Muslim individuals who find it difficult to participate in sport when it is considered as not important by their religion and when they are having to integrate into a society where they are the minority and where they are sometimes considered as 'outsiders' (Millward, 2008). For example participant C suggested,

*Yeah, it's promoted it, and it's agreed that you should take part in sports. It hasn't really said that you're not allowed to play sports...Religion is one thing, sport is another, and you shouldn't bring religion into sports, 'cause your religion shouldn't matter if you play sports at all.*  
(Participant C).

The multiplicity and complexity of subtle difference between individual identities and religious interpretations (Ahmad and Seddon, 2012) of the role and position of sport can also be contrasted with Participant F who clearly states,

*Because Islam hasn't prevented us, its culture that has prevented us.*  
(Participant F).

It could be that this is a reference to the wider societal culture and Islamophobia that limits participation. More recent research with British Asian Muslim cricket participants has also shown use of alcohol and a requirement to be 'part of a drinking culture' in local league cricket can also prevent Muslim male participation (Ratna, Lawrence and Partington, 2016). Likewise, differences between local and regional community settings in Britain are also important to recognise in understanding that culture may well be a strong factor, but what this represents, the meanings attached to it and how this plays out in potential participant behaviour will vary considerably (Amara and Henry, 2010).

For another participant, he suggests,

*Yeah, (I am ) open to it, I think, but not vastly, vastly, but yeah, it does promote it, in a way, but very little.*  
(Participant G).

In contrast to this view one respondent was critical of the interaction between their religious community and sport development processes,

*No they're not going to promote it so they try to promote Islam or make sure you pray or there is a class going on Friday and blah, blah, blah but they won't promote football.*  
(Participant E).

Thus, it can be seen above that there is a multiplicity of complex views on Islam in relation to promoting, influencing or preventing sport participation. Current sport development practitioners and policy makers need to recognise this diversity in environments, cultures and individual perceptions when aiming to engage such Muslim male participants. In relation to the findings, key interpretations include that Islam does promote sport and should be done to benefit health. Equally, that for some interpretations of Islamic faith promotes sport, but, perhaps less than some practicing Muslims might expect. Some more isolated held views hold that religion also expects individuals to focus on religious teachings and Islam and/or does not promote sport at all. This is not to try and build a generalisation for all British Asian Muslims, instead we offer a local account of the rich meanings and multiple interpretations from this study.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

In terms of sport development policy and practice we agree with recent research that has called for gaining a better understanding of minority groups being targeted by policy makers (Amara and Henry, 2011; Burdsey, 2011; Cleland, 2014). In this study we have illustrated the diversity and complexity of multiple interplays between British Asian Muslim youth identities and sport participation. There is no magic formula. Far from it. In fact, given levels of cultural racism, perceptions of Islamophobia and the current wider political climate around immigration as a monolithic 'issue' this is a fertile ground for closer rich policy-related research. The recent Sport England strategy (2016) and latest figures recognise that 'hard to reach' groups such as those in this study should be targeted. What we have identified is that experiences and day-to-day narratives indicate that far more understanding and intercultural-dialogue is needed to truly engage with different faith communities. Here, the recognition of the importance of local needs both sporting and cultural is essential to provide appropriate support to facilitate, engage and retain sport participants from British Asian Muslim backgrounds.

We have endeavoured in our representation and presentation of this research to move beyond this to encourage other communities to engage with this important topic and bring better understanding for this sphere of sport development policy that remains largely silent in current government thinking (HM Government, 2015; Sport England, 2016a). We also recognise that this project is part of what Blackman and Commane (2012) refer to as the facing the challenge of 'double reflexivity'. In essence encompassing doing the fieldwork and then facing the politics and complexity of how 'we' (usually the academic researchers) write it up, re-present and construct a textual narrative of the stories of the everyday lives of the lived social world and experiences encountered. As Hollands (2003) has proposed, the real challenge may lie in how we open up these representations and textual forms, post-fieldwork to the communities we research. In our case we directly do this by aiming to return to the field and develop our on-going relationship with the community faith organisation we collaborated with. We also hope to share our findings and open wider debate and dialogue with policy makers in our field in the context of the new Sporting Nation strategy (HM Government, 2015; and more recent pleas to address 'hard to reach' groups (Sport England, 2016a). It is too early in this project to identify neat recommendations, bringing the debate and realities onto the national policy and practice agenda is our first priority in attempting to provide a voice to the participants in this research. The young men we interviewed clearly inhabit an everyday process of constantly reconstructing their social and religious identities (Hall, 1996). How this influences sport participation remains largely unexplored and fertile ground for future collaborations between researchers, policy makers and faith-based communities.

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